

# COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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## MOVING TO LEARN: KINESTHETIC LEARNING

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*Ah, if you could only dance all that you've just said,  
then I would understand.*

— ZORBA THE GREEK

Nikos Kazantzakis

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### PAULA'S DANCE

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In first grade, Paula was assessed as learning disabled. For the next four years, she was placed in special education classrooms and experienced little if any academic success. Paula consistently lagged two or more grade levels behind her peers in the basic skills. Her self-esteem decreased and, understandably, her dislike of school increased. By the end of the fifth grade, Paula hid under her bed in the morning to avoid going to school, and during the summer before her sixth grade year, she attempted suicide. Her parents, aware that it was necessary to provide her with a successful sixth grade experience, mainstreamed her into a classroom with an empathetic teacher.

Observing the girl for the first couple of days, the teacher noticed an exceptional grace. Paula moved with poise and dignity. Tall for her age, she walked and ran with ease, her long hair mirroring her movements. Whenever the teacher watched Paula, she imagined a dancer and one day, asked the girl if she had ever studied dance. Paula explained she had indeed taken ballet lessons, which she greatly enjoyed but had to discontinue because of their cost. This information made the teacher wonder if Paula would learn more efficiently with kinesthetic instruction.

Although Paula was in sixth grade, her spelling skills approximated those of a second grader. She refused to read, write, or practice spelling word lists. Following her hunch that Paula was a kinesthetic learner, the teacher asked the girl to create a movement alphabet using her body to form each of the 26 letters. For example, to demonstrate the letter "t," Paula could stand erect, with her legs together and her arms outstretched. Some letters would obviously be challenging to create, such as an m, b or a w, but they'd be thought-provoking and interesting to tackle. Paula said she would think about it.

Before school the very next day, Paula hurried to her classroom telling the teacher she had something to show her. Paula began her demonstration, dancing the letters of the alphabet one at a time and then sequencing all 26 into a dance. The ballet, performed with confidence and skill, was accomplished in total silence. Paula was unabashedly pleased with her performance and the teacher was awestruck. The girl was a dancer. The instructor asked Paula if she could dance her first name. The dance was quickly performed with Paula adding her last name as well. Next, she danced the words on the board and that evening, Paula practiced a list of spelling

words at home and danced them for her classmates the following day. Within a week Paula quickly moved from dancing to writing. First, she performed individual words, then wrote them. Then she danced entire sentences. Paula's spelling and writing scores increased as did her self-confidence in learning.

After four months, to everyone's chagrin, Paula no longer danced her writing. She simply remained seated and wrote her assignments along with the rest of her class. By the end of her sixth grade year, Paula was writing and reading at grade level. Four months of kinesthetic learning, of learning through an inherent strength, transformed Paula's school experience and her self-image. For her seventh grade year, Paula attended the local junior high school where, mainstreamed in all classes, she earned above-average grades.

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## DEFINITION: UNDERSTANDING KINESTHETIC INTELLIGENCE

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Paula is not alone in her need to experience physically what she learns. Many children and adults find visual and auditory modes insufficient sensory channels for understanding and remembering information. Such individuals rely on tactile or kinesthetic processes and must manipulate or experience what they learn in order to understand and retain it. Tactile students learn through touch and manipulation of objects, while kinesthetic learners involve their whole bodies in their activities or prefer to work with concrete, real-life experiences. Both tactile and kinesthetic individuals learn through "doing" and through multi-sensory experiences.

Kinesthetic learning processes are frequently undervalued in school, since most academics hold other problem-solving ap-

proaches in higher esteem. In *Frames of Mind*, Gardner notes that a separation between mind and body has emerged in recent cultural traditions. He bemoans a loss of the Greek ideal of "... a harmony between mind and body, with the mind trained to use the body properly, and the body trained to respond to the expressive powers of the mind."

Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence includes the ability to unite body and mind in the refinement of physical performance. Beginning with control of automatic and voluntary movements, kinesthetic intelligence progresses to the use of our bodies in highly differentiated and skilled ways. All talented performances require an acute sense of timing and the transformation of intention into action. Highly developed kinesthetic intelligence is easily discerned when we observe actors, athletes, or dancers. It is also evident in inventors, jewelers, mechanics, and others who work with their hands, since this intelligence includes skillful work with objects. Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence is the foundation of human knowing, since it is through our sensory-motor experiences that we experience life.

When kinesthetic experiences are included in classroom learning, many students benefit. Physical activities focus student attention and aid memory by encoding learning throughout the body's neuro-musculature. We all have "muscle memory" and can use it effectively in learning. This kind of memory, used to recall physical skills, is especially long-lasting when applied to academic subjects.